

## Book review

*Cleft Tongue: The Language of Psychic Structures*. Dana Amir. London, UK: Karnac, 2014, 176 pages 162 p. (paperback) ISBN 9781782200420

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I willingly accepted the challenge of reviewing *Cleft Tongue: The Language of Psychic Structures* for *Language & Psychoanalysis*. The book was written by Dr. Dana Amir, a psychoanalyst, clinical psychologist, poet, literary scholar and lecturer at the University of Haifa (Israel). *Cleft Tongue* is her second book. Her first, *On the Lyricism of the Mind* (2008, in Hebrew), based on her doctoral dissertation, was awarded the Bahat Prize for an Original Academic Book (2006). *Cleft Tongue* centers on internal grammar: what the psychic language is and how the mind creates itself through its unique language.

I'll say from the start that in *Cleft Tongue* Amir attains the finest integration of language and psychoanalysis, thus reflecting their merger in real inner life. This indivisible unity becomes apparent from the opening lines of the book, inviting and tempting the reader to delve into it (p. xi):

This book is an attempt to think through psychic language, in its diverse forms and modes of expression, both within psychic structures as well as the inter-personal realm. What kind of rapture does psychotic language create? What is an autistic syntax? What are the body's forms of expression and how do they render themselves to interpretation?

Thinking about variations in language and their modes of expression within local constituents and entire discourses, and particularly within specific languages – their forms as well as their meanings – is the bread and butter of the linguist and linguistics, investigating verbal (human) behavior. To use Kuhn's (1962) terminology, "standard linguistics" (this term is in itself a generalization) observations differ from the observations in *Cleft Tongue*. In this book generalizations are based on the incorporation of endless singularities, while linguistic taxonomies and generalizations are a balanced flattening of whatever fails to conform with predetermined concepts and definitions (norms concerning amount, rules, etc.). While linguistic practice is invested in sorting objects, Amir's observation of the psychic language, "does not signify entities but rather

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that which cannot be attained” (p. 2). As we shall shortly show, *Cleft Tongue* protects and preserves singularity, uniqueness and absence within its generalizations.

As is clear from our journal’s title – and from *Cleft Tongue*, language, aside from being an important tool serving psychoanalysis, occupies a unique place in psychoanalytic theory and practice. The key position that language plays in the analytic space derives from perceiving language and speech as symptoms and perceiving symptoms as languages and speech (Forrester, 1980, p. 131). Speech is the chief medium of the psychoanalytic session, hence acquired its name “the talking cure”. Even in its prior (hypnotic) phase Freud (1890, p. 283) asserts that “Words are the essential tool of mental treatment. A layman will no doubt find it hard to understand how pathological disorders of the body and the mind can be eliminated by ‘mere words’”.

Freud and his associates and successors through the varied directions in which psychoanalysis has developed (e.g., Jacques Lacan’s (1966) views on language and psychoanalysis) depicted the fundamental role that absence plays in the life drive and the death drive, and the genuine association between absence and language. This holds not only in cases such as the child of the urban legend, who was considered reticent because as long as the soup was warm enough he did not encounter lack, therefore had no motivation to communicate. The indispensable link between language and absence goes back to earlier, preliminary pre-verbal stages preceding separation and individuation. The establishment of language and its nature is determined by experiences of multiplicity and distinction which involve lack: I/not-I. This is the foundation of Amir’s (pp. 1-2) approach:

Language is first and foremost a depressive achievement involving both the concession of what cannot be articulated – and the giving up of the symbiosis with the other by acknowledging him or her as a distinct subject. Indeed, acknowledging separation is simultaneously the driving motivation to speak as well as an essential condition for establishing language. [...] Indeed, establishing language enacts a similar ambivalence to that which takes place in the process of mourning, as it implies both an adherence to the object as well as the capacity to let go and recreate it within.

Language as the work of mourning is created from loss. It does not eliminate the gap (it does not bring back “the thing itself”) but it may act as an opening to internalizing the lost object by restructuring it and making it significant for future experiences (see Amir, 2008). The following is an example of the role played by encountering absence in motivating the establishment of language. Freud tells of his grandson, who at the age of one and a half, when his mother, to whom he was attached, left for a few hours therefore was not available to him, used to stand up in his cot, throw a toy and call aloud “o-o-o-o”. Freud – noting that the child did this with an expression of interest and satisfaction on his

face – interpreted this call as the German word *fort* (gone). Freud then noticed that when doing this the child would throw a wooden reel tied to a string out of his sight (behind the curtain of his cot); he then hauled the object back, hailing its reappearance with a joyful *da* (here). The boy repeated this act of playing over and over. Freud interpreted this child's "disappearance and return" game as a way to compensate himself for his mother's absence; but also, as Freud (1920, pp. 14-15) explains in accordance with the pleasure principle, "her departure had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return".

A living language is one that maintains a dialogue with the other; it allows grief and separation from the lost object by recreating it internally in the mind. When this process is missing or is not brought to an end, these experiences remain detached and isolated. Speech is the means and condition which enable forgetting (Forrester, 1980).<sup>2</sup> A living (psychic) language, says Amir, is a language that is capable of exceeding itself and observing itself. It is a language that has the power to bring about change.

The nature of mother-tongue and how children acquire it is a major linguistic topic (see e.g. the debate between Skinner and Chomsky: Chomsky, 1959). Amir's investigation ascribes mother-tongue<sup>3</sup> a predominant role in establishing the psychic language as well as its desecration. Amir details three essential functions of the mother-tongue (pp. 5-6):

1. Being a non-persecutory context that dilutes the objects' threatening being, the mother and mother-tongue enable its naming and its linkage to other objects;
2. Endowing the child with her or his proper name, the mother and mother-tongue consecrate the child's singularity.
3. Presenting the father as a non-traumatic object, the mother and mother-tongue enable the father's presence to erect a buffer between private and public, and to enable the child's transition from individual language to common (corresponding to the shift from first-person to third-person in emotional speech).

For each of the above functions Amir stipulates the part played by the (good-enough) mother in enabling language growth, and the part played by a persecutor mother in desecrating and attacking growth. Amir poses two phases of an attack on language, contrasting living psychic languages (therefore considered non-languages): concrete language – emptying desire of its object, and pseudo-language – emptying the object of

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<sup>2</sup> The reader is encouraged to see Amir's (p. 137) analysis of an interaction cited from Alterman, in which the beggar interprets the music-box-man's need to learn the words of his own song as a fault, while Hananel (the protagonist) interprets the situation by saying: "You forget them because you already remember them."

<sup>3</sup> Amir uses the term not to denote the national language of one's birth but as a term referring to the internalized mother's emotional language (p. 143 n. 1).

its desire.<sup>4</sup> These (non-)languages are not arbitrary but are evoked by diverse purposes, which sometimes may even clash. Concrete language attests to a maternal object that gave names to things (therefore enabled concrete language), but lacking emotive language it did not give names to feelings or offer emotional meanings. Pseudo-language indicates a deceptive maternal object, which is filled with words that [might] have been exposed in silence, therefore instead of creating foundations of speech it creates no-speech. This is considered empty speech.

Language is a vital factor in creating boundaries and establishing links within them (between I and non-I, between presence and absence, between the present and the past and the future, between reality and imagination). Such a public language is entrusted to the father (“Name of the Father”, and see pp. 129-130). Through the father’s separate relations with the mother on the one hand and with the infant on the other, the father acts as the Third introducing the concept of otherness to the mother-child uterine symbiosis. Amir (p. 7) says that only a mother who experiences the father’s figure as non-violent, “would enable a free flow between the singular and common registers of speech in a way that serves the child authentic needs.” This position makes it the mother’s role to enable the father’s status as a buffer. Mother-tongue and language play a crucial role in the emergence of social order in the oedipal phase.

Clearly, from the second function of the mother-tongue, the endowment of a proper name to the newborn – also part of the formation of the child’s psychic language –enjoys here illuminating references and descriptions. Amir maintains that our proper name is the first gift we receive from the other, as well as the first symbol of otherness. While showing its worth as a gift, the book also deals with the desecrated exploitation of the name to debase the self, resulting in an urge to reject naming and in abstention from speech. One must keep in mind that this is not limited to a name already in use (an existing name, a name already given) but to every occasion of naming. Each proper name given to a newborn equals a unique narrative composed by condensation and displacement of internal and external elements. When the newborn is at the center of the narrative the chosen name is a blessing. But when, for example, the narrative grounding the choice of a name is driven by parental narcissistic disorders – such as crude jealousy, lack of separation, lack of parental empathy or inability to enter intimacy; when the choice of name serves to glorify the parent – then such a name is a desecration: the child is born into a name and a world which is not his/hers (see Nadav et al., 2011).

Concrete language and pseudo-language then are two basic forms of delay in the development of emotive language. Concrete language is the product of the absence of a developmental soil for creating emotive language, and is characterized by the absence of singularity as an attack on the bonding/connection: emotions do not obtain a form of language. Pseudo-language is the product of a language that was created but then was desecrated. This is a refusal to be in touch with language, hence refusal to move on to a common/plural language. Pseudo-language is characterized as a defensive verbal construction: talking with no experience. Pseudo-language does not fight a void but prompts the denial of existence. Its containment is a barrier between the speaker and her or his singularity, reflected in a fluent yet hollow language: a language that separates, syntax without link.

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<sup>4</sup> Sic., unfortunately this was misphrased in English translation of the book (p. 3).  
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The book explores in depth discourses of five mental categories. Each chapter presents the pathological etiology and its verbal manifestations, accompanying such presentations with clinical illustrations. Amir stresses that her intention is “not only to outline the dialectic far-end textures [...] but also to identify these typical syntactic zones in their simple, everyday manifestations in ordinary language and in the non-pathological” (p. xii). Carefully reading the chapters in light of the two types of non-language, the reader will notice that some dispositions are clearly identified with one of the two non-languages, and in others variations of the two show up together. In line with her explicit intention, Amir makes use of vignettes extracted from treatment sessions alongside literary works. We now review chapters 2-6 in succession.

**Chapter 2: The split between voice and meaning: the dual function of psychotic syntax** (pp. 31-48). Amir views the psychotic personality, or psychotic potentiality, as the product of a destructive absence of the mother’s wish for the baby as a new subject (a separate subject, the fruit of desire of both parents). This absence, Amir explains, results from the totality of the mother’s wish for her own birth (by her mother). In such a scenario, the mother cannot fulfill her role as an emotional regulator and as the generator of a mental space that is coherent, protective and meaningful for the infant. The child’s way to survive in face of his mother’s death wish is to develop a torn and distorted representation of the self, of parents and of the world. This is manifested in delusional discourse, “[o]nce prohibited the construction of an autonomous syntax, the subject creates a ‘non-syntactic’ syntax by means of which an illusion of continuity is generated” (p. 36). Amir explains the formation of psychotic hybrid language (by people who are not psychotic) as the attack of the mother-tongue on the birth of an object language (of the child). The mother does not allow the growth of the child’s language but imposes on him her intimacy. That which is embodied in the hybrid language is an incompatible mixture of fancy lexicon and infantile syntax (e.g., with no causality and context). Language embodies the child’s split and reconstructs the mother’s split. This is a shadow language, a language without a personal voice and with no meaning (because the meaning of their language is exposure and confrontation with the mother’s death wish). Such an exposure threatens falling apart. The psychotic language is voiced (and heard), but bypasses meaning hence is used not to link but to neutralize and dismantle.

**Chapter 3: The chameleon language of perversion** (pp. 49-66). Perversion is described as a desperate attempt to distinguish life from the primal scene (between parents), which is experienced as dead by the compulsive eroticization of the psychological emptiness and death. Such eroticization is designed to arouse excitement that is experienced unconsciously as a false alternative. This is fraud that looks true and truth that looks fake. It is the seduction of the other and the use of the other and the relationship with him (such as sex) not as an end but as a means of control and subjugation. The perverse subject recruits the false and deceptive use of the other’s language in the service of this seduction to trap the other and fuse with it. She or he uses the other’s verbal language (and symbolic means such as gestures) as if they were their own. The perverse subject infiltrates the other, adopting his language as a chameleon language. In this way the perverse subject penetrates and conquers the other without his presence as a foreign body revealed. The perverse person adopts the other’s syntax in order to capture and arouse him. According to Amir, to avoid contact with the insufferable inner content pseudo-language generates an artificial syntax set up on the other’s language. On the other hand, the perverse subject uses the selected other and his language to appropriate him for the needs of the perverse subject. This can result in total identification, whose impact works

here almost as a compulsive force, akin to attraction-repulsion relations toward the uncanny, forever experienced as insufficient. This dialog is ever experienced as barren (not alive) and leads to repetitive circularity (which replicates the primal scene). The pervert infiltrates the other and his language to ensure his own existence; he transgresses boundaries in order to feel them. By trapping and fusing with the other the pervasive subject simultaneously creates himself as a subject and creates the other as an event to which the subject can testify. But this is false, since he is a witness to an event of another and absent as a witness to his own event.

**Chapter 4: The psychic organ point of autistic syntax** (pp. 67-90). Following Francis Tustin, Amir explains autism as “‘not knowing’ and ‘not hearing’ which are the result of the traumatic and premature recognition of the infant’s separateness from the mother” (pp. 68-69). She stresses the inability of the autistic encapsulation to be an envelope and to cast an experience of protection. The child with autism lacks the ability to play with language (sounds and words) and with objects. Imaginary play, transitional objects and language, are all the development of transformational means allowing the infant to tolerate separateness and absence. But for the child with autism flattening of objects, compulsive repetitive use of words and ritual manners, lacking distinction between them (including perceiving them as the thing itself and not its substitute) – all carry a shallow static fetishist quality, aimed at avoiding the experience of the lack of movement (and of life). Amir applies different imageries to illustrate this phenomenon. She makes use of the musical organ point, which unlike its musical role as a leading musical sound, in the (inverse) autistic analog does not maintain relationships with other sounds nor even have any polyphony whatsoever: it stands single and detached. Another image is that in place of a framework that allows the developing child to negate the presence of his mother in order to create for himself the representation of the mother’s disappearance (see above – *fort da*) the child with autism erases without representation that which threatens as destruction.

The term “syntax” is used throughout the book. Some of its uses suggest unequivocally that Amir’s use of the word does overlap with its conventional linguistic sense (i.e., the grammatical structure that is beyond word level, such as phrases, and their role in the sentence). “Syntax” referring here to unchanging rules of the language (not necessarily in the syntactic level) becomes apparent from Amir’s discussion of autistic language (p. 79, and see p. 144 n. 3). Opposed to these unchanging rules are soft particles of the language, such as emotion, humor and intonation, which fill the syntax with meaning. Evidently, these particles change from person to person and from one context to another. Amir relates the difficulty of the child with autism to integrate soft particles with hard ones to autistic speech seeming syntactically accurate (grammar rules) but emotionally barren. Amir rightly refers to the selective mutism among children with autism (in the face of people with Asperger, who talk incessantly, reference to autistic mutism has been frequently suppressed). By creating a world in which the other has neither part nor meaning, the child with autism “locks outside” the non-I. The person with autism uses people, words and things as (auto-)sensuous objects. This attracts him or her to rigid syntax, harsh words, consonants and rigid rhyming. Those do not nurture meaning, spatial and temporal relationships, or otherness. They are all, as it were, clutched and squeezed in a clenched fist. Here too Amir does not confine her discussion to pathological cases but shows their emergence also among non-pathological subjects, for example, the use of a dyadic autistic language among spouses, siblings, and therapist and patient: not to innovate but to fixate a repetitive pattern. All that such a dyad creates is a

rigid surface impenetrable to meaning (even not idiosyncratic meaning). In such a state there is no internal space for working-through mental processes. This is a language statically clinging rather than dynamically intersecting. It is a false dyad excluding variation or otherness.

**Chapter 5: The inner witness** (pp. 91-110). Amir relates the quest for a witness to the trauma to the third function she has attributed to the mother-tongue. The subject hopes that testimony will retroactively extricate the traumatic experience from its isolated stagnation, and that by confronting it through its transformation into a narrative (constituting a reporter, a story and a recipient) the traumatic experience will transform from a black hole into presence. Amir emphasizes the mother's role in providing a tolerable and timed amount of helplessness that is essential for creating an inner witness, that is, the ability to exceed the initial victimization situation, face it and give it meaning. The witness is not only a victim but a victim with a voice (and meaning). When such deviation is not possible, helplessness eradicates the role of the witness (as first person). The chief role of the testimonial function of the mind, says Amir, is not limited to the ability to maintain a continuous sense of spontaneity and vitality but is also to be able to cope with later traumas, utilizing the ability to alternate between the victim position and the witness position. In the absence of such ability the representation of the trauma and a vivid experiential link with it are not possible. The internal becomes discourse portraying autistic or psychotic syntax, to buffer the individual against the trauma and that same individual against himself. This is perjury language, language lacking partition, language negating itself, presenting forged similarity and total symmetry between self and other, and between interior and exterior (none of these holds a place of its own). In such a discourse the subject-object are not distinct, the event forms the testimony, and the testimony could equally form the event. Inability to deviate from the actual present (remember the past and envisage the future) is an experience of sterilization, manifested in a hollow syntax that does not allow extension. Amir presents the discourse of the characters in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* as an example of false equal relations and of syntax and discourse devoid of a witness. She concludes regarding the extreme situation of no relationships and its reflection in the absence of syntactic relations (subject-object) by saying that every sentence can be read or recited equally from beginning to end as well as from end to beginning. What keeps the protagonists of *Waiting for Godot* together is anticipation of the third as a witness to their existence, thus ending the process of their elimination. Is this not the experience of Job (42: 1-4) when he turns to God as the subject supposed to know ("*sujet supposé savoir*")?

Then Job answered the Lord, and said, I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me.

**Chapter 6: Nausea as a refusal of a mother-tongue: the psychosomatic, metaphoric, metonymic, and psychotic expression** (pp. 111-132). From its beginning psychoanalysis

distinguished three modes of signification (somatization): the primary mode is physical symptoms; next comes behavior such as acting-in and acting-out. The third mode is speech, which is the most advanced (culturally it requires language with all it entails). As mentioned, this is also the basis for the psychoanalytic “talking cure” approach. The bodily psychosomatic symptoms are the most primitive; they do not reach representation in the inner world. According to Amir, within the flow of somatic phenomena there is also a degree of symbolization hierarchy (“physical syntax”): from conversion as a living and concrete metaphor for the repressed contents (which is most accessible to interpretation) all the way to opaque (not transparent) psychosomatic manifestations. The latter are metonymy resulting from primitive and limited shifting from the psychic scene to the physiological (bodily) scene. Beside these two types of psychosomatic manifestations, Amir identifies a third type: the psychotic psychosomatic expression of no-symbolization. Opposed to the metaphorical expression, the psychotic psychosomatic expression carries no meaning. Unlike the metonymic expression it does not preserve a continuum.<sup>5</sup> The psychotic psychosomatic expression does not allow any construction of an experiencing I. Such expressions are not an escape from the traumatic but a weld with it. This produces an illusion of union without lack.

In this chapter Amir discusses the experience of nausea as having to do with the absence of boundaries. It is simultaneously an expression of fusion and of distancing, demonstrating a psychotic psychosomatic event. The feeling of disgust is associated with excessive closeness and the need to “restore” it by repulsion. Amir links this nausea with dealing with separateness and separation from the body of the mother. Nausea may represent the wish to separate and the wish not to separate. This is a case of a physical phenomenon transforming into an object in its own right. It is not the repetition of signifiers but the repetition of the collapse of the signifier in face of the referent.<sup>6</sup> Amir talks about the generalizing and comparing double-phased use of language (and words): one is facilitation of the experience of propagation by binding it under a single name (title); the other is differentiation and singularity. Naming as an experience of otherness allows transformation from an experience that is bodily to an experience of a first-person speaker. Amir says:

Given that distance becomes possible only through language, when the latter is rejected the individual finds him or herself facing an archaic incestuous maternal object, lacking I outline, an object with whom proximity by definition is over-proximity, satiating to the point of nausea, suffocating in its sticky surfeit which fills up all space (p. 128).

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<sup>5</sup> Amir (p. 117) sets out the discussion on somatization from Jakobson’s (1965) view of metaphor and metonymy as polar opposites, and Lacan’s (1966) view of metaphor as an organizing way to construct meaning and of metonymy as a way to resist meaning.

<sup>6</sup>The very shift from the axis of the signifier to that of the signified is a metonymic shift of contiguity or synecdoche (of the part and the whole), and not a metaphorical shift owing to resemblance.



**Epilogue: Interpretation and over-interpretation** (pp. 133-142). The book's epilogue is devoted to language as the work of interpretation. Amir identifies interpretation in the therapeutic context not only with the content itself (naming) but more with subtle modes of balancing the interpretation and its object: the way the interpretation presents that object to the gaze. According to Amir, interpretation at its best, which is also the only interpretation, is an open interpretation that reveals the pure individual: by subtracting the general from the individual, interpretation allows access to that part of the individual that is not the case of the rule. Its aim is not to conquer but to create motion between the subject and himself and the subject and the other.

### ***Cleft Tongue: Language & Psychoanalysis***

A book review sets out to make the readers curious, thus to influence them to read the book. Due to space limits, this review focused on presenting the very specific nuclei of the book. The reader is warmly invited to discover the case studies and analysis of literary works vividly illustrating the different inner worlds and their idiosyncratic psychic language. Among these, I have left to the reader's perusal Amir's discussion – covering every phenomenon and dialect language – of the therapist's corresponding and constitutive language, either as a reflection or as a grip and a bridge, as otherness or as a dismissal of seduction.

As explained, language as symptom and symptom as language have been acknowledged as central to the study of psychoanalysis. Thus, the contribution of *Cleft Tongue* lies not in proposing the issue but in its careful unique and integrative investigation as the psychic language and its parlance, looking at their forms, contents and functions (the three chief tasks of the linguist) and doing so not as a technical analysis of an arbitrary code but from the etiology in which they are created (for connecting or disengaging, separateness or intimacy, cure or perpetuation).

*Cleft Tongue* free of the taxonomic linguistic methods, offering a rich reasoned and broad perspective of the speaking subject and his language in the inner-subjective and inter-subjective spaces. This interaction space is not a flat space but a dialectical space in which non-communication is also communication, and at times, as in the case of black-hole, this could well be the only way of communication.

As seen above, *Cleft Tongue* also grants its readers a view of language as entirety: listening to upper-tones with analytical smoothly floating attention, listening without memory and without desire, departs from the direction and practice of traditional linguistics. Instead of comparing with norms, definitions and rules its starting point is the broadest unique entirety, making out its meaning for the individual and for human existence. For Amir, the only interpretation is the one revealing purified individuality (p. 141). Psychoanalysis is by its nature both a therapeutic tool unreservedly aimed at a particular individual engaging in her or his intimacy and singularity, and an all-encompassing human-social theory, ranging from unique singularity to its meaning in the universal context. The book moves between an outright rejection of concepts such as norms and definitions and delineating their outline. This results in a complete picture, aptly reflecting self (addresser) / other (addressee) relations, which exploits all the structural and semantic apparatus and means familiar to us by subtly exceeding them.

## **Biographical Note**

Michal Ephratt is a professor in the Department of Hebrew Linguistics at the University of Haifa, Israel. The major focus of her efforts is in the study of silence as means of communication. Her research interests include also linguistic models in non-linguistic disciplines, particularly psychoanalysis, and language in real-life setting, such as verbal iconicity and personal given-names.

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